

20

Barcelona Societat

Journal on social knowledge and analysis



Ajuntament
de Barcelona

December 2016

Foreword

Albert Sales

Barcelona Society journal is relaunched after a five-year break. It returns in a new format and with a commitment to share its contents on a digital platform, maintaining as always its commitment to technical and academic rigour and to serve the city and its citizens. On the basis of this commitment, we devote Issue 20 to homelessness and housing exclusion, bringing together different visions, research and experiences in order to outline one of the challenges all the large European cities must tackle and one to which the citizenship, organizations and Barcelona's municipality have always been very sensitive.

In 2008, the Network of Attention to Homeless People in Barcelona, formed by 31 social organizations and the City Council, launched an effort to systematize data and knowledge on homelessness situation in the city, producing a series of periodical reports fostered by several research methodologies and the exploitation of the register of public and private services currently attending people facing serious problems of housing exclusion. Between 2008 and 2016, the number of people sleeping in accommodation centres of organizations and the local authorities have risen 60%; from 1,190 people housed in different centres on March 11th 2008 to 1,907 on May the 18th 2016. This increase has helped to contain the impact of housing exclusion, but hasn't reduced the number of people sleeping on the street. While the first count made on March the 11th 2008, registered 658 people sleeping rough, on May the 18th 2016, 800 volunteers localised 941 rough sleepers. A 37% increase in eight years¹. Data on these city counts confirm the organizations' and local authorities services' perception and coincide with the trends also revealed in the reports of the Social Inclusion Service of Barcelona City Council's street outreach teams.

During the decades of expansion of the welfare states and, later on, until the 90's, the homelessness problem has tended to be reduced to a street dimension, considering that the solution was to attend people on the street as if they suffered a social pathology and needed social accompaniment. As a consequence, the emergency attention in shelters has been seen as the right moment for social services to recreate bonds with the people attended through the covering of basic needs. From the last 30 years onwards, though, the increase in the percentage of the population who can't access housing and suffer severe social vulnerability is a common phenomenon in most western cities.

Policies steered by stereotyped images and addressed to the provision of emergency accommodation see the victims of exclusion as though they were affected by a social pathology

¹ 2011 data collected by Sales et al. (2015); 2016 data provided by the Network of Attention to Homeless People from the count of May the 18th.

that needs treatment. Empirical data reveals that the diversity of pathways leading to housing exclusion and the complex interplay between structural and individual factors affecting the people who suffer homelessness and extreme poverty must encourage us to break stereotypes and acknowledge that homeless people share the inability to execute their right to housing. The experts who participate in this number help us to understand homelessness as a consequence of society's failure to guarantee rights; to identify that phenomenon as an ongoing problem, where the rough sleepers are the tip of the iceberg, and to transform intervention approaches which have shaped the social services methodologies to accompany the people attended.

The following pages display an overview from a perspective of rights of the homeless, explain the evolution of attention policies addressed to the homeless people in Barcelona and broaden the scope towards homelessness forms attached to international mobility and legal exclusion suffered by an increasing number of migrants. It is also analysed the revolution of placing housing at the centre of the systems of attention to homeless people, considering the potential of the Housing First approach to introduce a shift in the design of social policies and in the daily practice of the support services.

The mechanism forcing people to live on street is fed by a highly discriminatory housing market, by a labour market inaccessible for many people, by a precarious benefits system and by management of migrant flows that condemns many of our neighbours to fall into an irregular situation. But, even though many structural causes of homelessness go beyond local policies, a better design of the stakeholders' daily interventions can prevent a lot of suffering, transform the social perception of the problem and generate social cohesion spaces aimed at building rights in the city.